



ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Angelique Bamberg

Public Housing: Democracy by Design

Who should provide affordable housing? Numerous generations have promoted different roles for the public and private sectors. At the turn of the 20th century, tenement reformers pushed the real estate and building industries to provide safe, sanitary accommodations for all. But Pittsburgh and its region continued to face a chronic shortage of worker housing. By the Great Depression, there was broad support for the government to build affordable apartments that the private sector would not. In 1937, Congress passed the Wagner-Steagall United States Housing Act, establishing and funding public housing.

Bedford Dwellings, Pittsburgh's first public housing project, under construction in the Hill District, c. 1940. The repetitive design of public housing's garden apartment buildings was an expression of egalitarianism and democracy as well as economy of budget.

HHC Detre L&A, Allegheny Conference on Community Development, 1892-1981, MSP 285.B29.F27.I3.



Western Pennsylvania was prepared. The Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh was already formed and poised to break ground on three public housing projects: Bedford Dwellings, Addison Terrace, and Allequippa Terrace, all in the Hill District. Over the next 12 years, the Pittsburgh and Allegheny County Housing Authorities together built at least 23 more public housing complexes. Many others, built by other local authorities around Western Pennsylvania, have yet to be inventoried.

It was a sign of the times that this early public housing was not meant for the poorest of the poor, but to help the “submerged middle class”—wage earners who, despite holding jobs, had trouble affording shelter during the Depression. At Allegheny Dwellings on Pittsburgh’s North Side, glazed terra cotta plaques depicted the types of occupations residents were expected to have: fire fighter, pipe fitter, carpenter, and seamstress, to name a few.

During World War II, public housing expanded to serve defense industry workers. These men and women flocked to industrialized regions such as Western Pennsylvania to claim new factory jobs, overwhelming the private housing market. The federal government opened its existing public housing complexes to war workers and their families in the early 1940s while building thousands more to meet demand. After the war, this “defense housing” reverted to income-based public housing or was sold.

The public housing complexes of the 1930s and '40s were idealistic in plan as



Social spaces fostered connection and community among residents of early public housing, such as at Pittsburgh's Terrace Village, shown here in the 1940s.

HHC Detre L&A, Allegheny Conference on Community Development, 1892-1981, MSP 285.B12.F15.I15.

UP FRONT

This terra cotta relief plaque of a pipe fitter at Allegheny Dwellings is one of many depicting the working-class occupations of public housing's first residents.

Photo by author.



A mother and her child pose in Mooncrest in 1946. Mooncrest was built in Moon Township in 1942 for defense workers employed at the nearby Neville Island shipyards.

Photo by Paul Duncan.



well as in purpose. They were designed to reinforce democratic ideals and to model the types of neighborhoods that might be built for working- and middle-class families after the war. Their egalitarian (some said Spartan and repetitive) architecture, consisting of low-rise, garden-apartment-style buildings, and shared outdoor amenities—such as courtyards, playgrounds, and drying yards for hanging laundry—were meant to foster social interaction and a culture of common identity among residents.

What public housing lacked in the articulation of individual buildings, it attempted to make up for in the design of the whole community. Street plans reflected

a 20th-century concern for the dangers of automobile traffic by establishing separate footpaths for pedestrians. Planners shunned the traditional street grid to experiment with different forms of traffic, from looping streets and cul-de-sacs to “superblocks” with no through streets at all. Many public housing projects also incorporated facilities such as social halls, primary schools, market or shop buildings, parks, and pools. Since most public housing was built on hilltops (where land was inexpensive), isolation made the provision of such resources crucial.

This early, optimistic era of public housing ended in 1949. Post-war legislation redirected federal housing policy toward

slum clearance, urban renewal, and high-rise apartment buildings for low-income families. Eventually, most early-era public housing projects were demolished, sold off (in the case of defense housing), or radically rebuilt. The story of public housing, intended to reinforce American narratives of democracy and opportunity, became instead one of socio-economic segregation and other unintended consequences.



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